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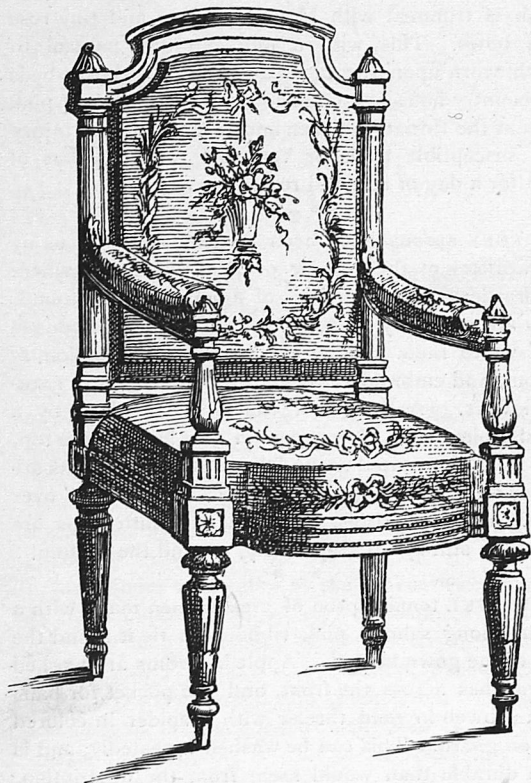
DECORATION & FURNITURE



TASTE IN FURNITURE.

ANY of our readers, no doubt, are familiar with the writings of the late Charles Blanc, and know how sound his views were in regard to the construction of furniture. Were it not that his knowledge was so many-sided, embracing every branch of pictorial, decorative, and industrial art, we should be inclined to compare the great French critic with his contemporary, Eastlake. Notwithstanding the disparity in the scope of their attainments, there was enough in common between them to speak of them together. Like Eastlake, Blanc was heartily opposed to trade shams of all kinds, and especially to the trickeries of the upholsterer and cabinet-maker, although it may well be doubted whether he succeeded as well as the English architect in arousing his countrymen to the necessity of reform in that direction. There is pretty much the same flimsiness now in the furniture and decoration of the average French house that there was before he brought out his "Grammaire des Arts Decoratifs," while, on the other hand, there can be no doubt that Eastlake's "Hints on Household Taste" has produced in English homes a very marked improvement, the effects of which have been greatly felt in this country. That beauty of form may be perfectly compatible with strength of material and that good design can accommodate itself to the most fastidious notions of convenience were principles set forth by both masters, but not with equal success. To invite attention to some of the observations of the French critic on taste in furniture is the purpose of the present article.

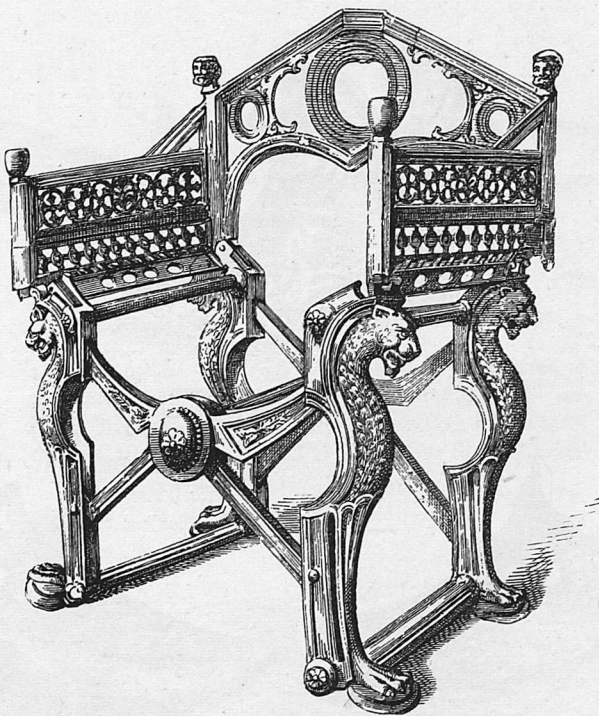
The laws of taste, M. Blanc says, may be adapted



LOUIS XVI. CHAIR.

to all degrees of fortune. Although taste presupposes a refinement of judgment and a certain nobility of feeling, it has no need of riches; and elevation of sentiment has nothing incompatible with plainness of surroundings and customs. Taste is but a refined idea of the relation between men and things, and therefore may embellish a humble dwelling as well as a magnifi-

cent palace. Upon entering a strange house you involuntarily form an opinion of the occupants from the impression made upon seeing the interior, and you estimate their wealth according to the quality of the furniture. In rooms open to visitors perfect order should prevail. The absence of such order would be lack of courtesy to the visitor, inasmuch as he would not feel



OLD FRENCH DAGOBERT CHAIR.

at home in the midst of confusion. In coming from the noisy street into a house we expect quiet, soft light, and perfect harmony. This is so true that many persons cannot bear a bust which is not upright or a picture which does not hang parallel with the cornice, or a table standing unevenly, but must reach out their hands to rectify the fault.

The arrangement of furniture in precise order need not extend to every apartment. It is suitable to a reception-room but quite out of place in a study or boudoir. An artist who meditates before beginning his task requires variety in his surroundings that his imagination may be quickened thereby. Mathematical symmetry does not suit the boudoir of a beautiful woman. We prefer variety, for instance a fauteuil, to urge a long visit, while a straight and narrow chair seems invented to shorten the call of an importunate visitor. An appearance of freedom suits all the home-rooms.

In the outline of a piece of furniture the straight lines should be vertical and the curved lines horizontal. All the movements of ordinary life are in curved lines. It is the exception to see a man stand upright and stiff, his arms extended, and a woman never takes any position without curved lines. There is no place for straight lines if it be not in furniture, which should be so designed that the axis of every part may be perpendicular to the floor.

To give tables and sofas curved legs, such as are so often found in Buhl cabinet work, or to affect arches in the props, as in the time of Madame de Pompadour, is to disconcert the beholder, who must suppose that everything is very inadequately upheld. Quadrupeds are supported upon legs not perfectly straight, but it must not, therefore, be concluded that their legs can be imitated in furniture. Animals are in constant motion, while furniture is stationary, and should be firm in both appearance and reality.

By the vertical line is not meant a simple stick. The vertical line need be only in the axis, that the eye may seize it. Nothing prevents the cabinet-maker from using every imaginable artifice to diminish the stiffness of the perpendicular which touches the floor.

Cabinet furniture should not be in the form of edifices nor decorated with architectural ornaments. A monument sublime in its immensity becomes ridiculous reduced to small proportions. This idea seems never to have occurred to the cabinet-maker, silversmith, or jeweller of the Renaissance. Balustrades, necessary to terraces and balconies, give, however, a pleasing effect to the Louis XV. and Louis XVI. furniture.

According to Viollet-le-Duc the furniture of the Middle Ages was varied in height, form, and dimensions. In proportion as some pieces were fixed and heavy, others were light and movable, and as conversation seems to suit itself to the arrangement of furniture, variety naturally assists and enlivens it.

It often happens that through long use we leave a sort of impression upon an article. This is particularly true of articles for personal use. By what mysterious power does the human soul attach itself to inert objects as an odor to a vase? Furniture has character when its form not only denotes its use, but also some particular bias of our daily thoughts.

The various early French names for chairs are curious and striking. Chairs suitable to the sick were called "confessionnaux," arm-chairs, "chaises de doléance," small, straight, cane-seated chairs, "chaises inquiétudes."

The chest or coffer is the primitive type of all our large pieces of furniture. Despite the variety and magnificence of the furniture of the present age, every article can be traced to this primitive one. In the chest, families still nomadic secured all their valuables. It served the weary as a seat or couch. It was often elaborately carved (see illustration) and in every way an elegant piece of furniture.

M. Blanc cites the Dagobert chair, illustrated herewith, as an instance where the obvious strength of the construction is sufficient to excuse the curved lines. In use, of course, a seat of tapestry was stretched on the frame shown in the cut. It is worthy of notice that this chair was originally a folding chair, subsequently strengthened by the addition of a bronze back. This is



GAMING-ROOM CHAIR.

only one instance among many of the use of forms whose original purpose has been ultimately outgrown. The cabinet-maker of the last century, M. Blanc considers, is the one who best understood æsthetic propriety in lines and forms. If the man of taste seeks the furniture of that age it is not only because of the general excellence which it presents, but specially because the forms of the eighteenth century style have at the same time dignity and grace, dignity in the straight

lines and grace in the curves which soften the angles. The Louis XVI. chair, shown herewith, happily illustrates this. The gaming-room chair is another example of last century work. On this the eager spectator of the games could sit astride, resting his arms on the stuffed crosspiece, or, if he preferred, he could kneel on the seat and support his elbows on the rest attached to the back.

The beautiful, carved, flat-topped cabinet shown on this page illustrates an important principle forcibly laid down by M. Blanc. A special propriety, he observes, in the furniture of the time of Louis XVI. is the suppression of the pediment, which the artificers of the Renaissance never failed to carve upon their armoires, side-boards, and dressing-tables. It is obvious that terminating these articles with a flat top permits a change of ornament at the will of the owner. Decorative glass or ceramic ware, or bronzes, so introduced, may enhance the beauty not only of the cabinet itself, but, if selected with skill as to color, of the entire apartment. Thus what seems stiff in the piece of furniture really allows increased grace and variety.

HINTS ABOUT PICTURE HANGING.

THE arrangement of pictures symmetrically so as to produce a sort of uniformity in size and disposition is always pleasing, as is all true symmetry. In a small room the eye takes in the whole of the picture at a glance and rests with content upon such a disposition of parts. On the other hand, if the pictures are of all sizes and hung without any regard to this principle, they look incongruous and anyhow, as if they were not worth the trouble of arranging properly. It is not always that our stock of pictures will be sufficiently near in size to enable us to distribute them equally. Still, if they are judiciously arranged, we may do away with the objection in a great measure. If it is engravings alone we have to hang, it is an easy matter to get them in pairs of a uniform size. With a mixture of oil-paintings and engravings this cannot well be done, but with care and good taste even these may be so arranged that they will not clash with one another.

The practice of hanging pictures so that they shall project forward at their tops is a question of position as to light. When the light falls full upon a picture, whether a varnished oil painting or a framed engraving or water-color, there is a glare or brightness which prevents the whole of the picture from being seen. This is a common case, and the only means of avoiding it is to let the picture hang out from the top so that we can see the whole of it from any part of the room without this objectionable light upon its surface. This is effected by placing the rings of the frame low enough down to cause the picture to have the desired inclination. It is a good plan when about hanging a room with pictures to make a sketch of the proposed arrangement previous to commencing hanging. This saves much after-labor and vexation. The largest picture should always have a central position, so that those of a less size and form can be symmetrically grouped around it. The eye will be satisfied by such an arrangement. The character and form of the frames is a very important factor in the question. Engravings and water-color paintings should always have a broad margin to the mount and a narrow light frame. The margin serves to isolate the painting or engraving, and thus enables us to see its beauties to much greater advantage. This is more especially the case if the wall upon which they are hung has a pattern upon it. These frames should be alike in make and breadth as far as possible.

Oil paintings require a different and much heavier frame than water-colors and engravings. The principal object in both cases is to display the painting to the best advantage. The broad margin does this with water-colors, but the oil painting having no plain margin we must depend upon the frame to effect its isolation.



CABINET OF CARVED WOOD.

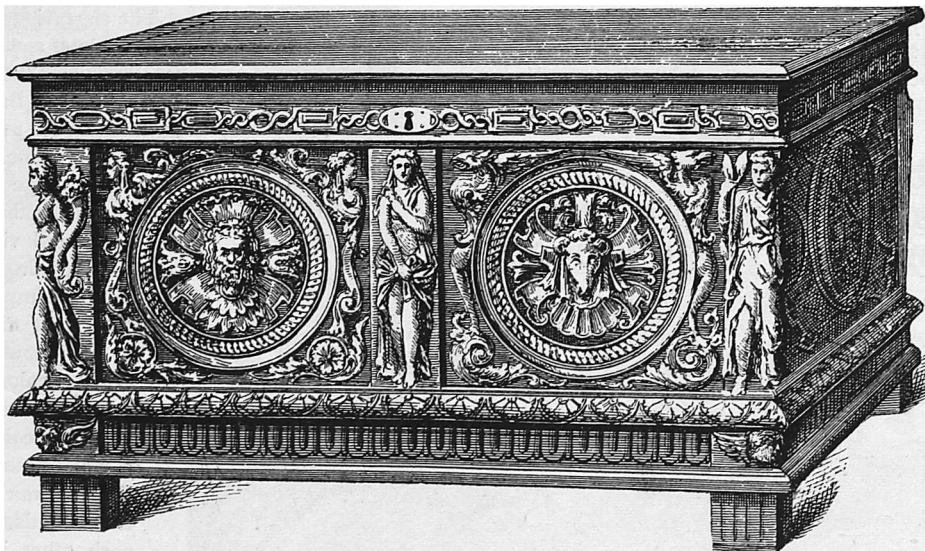
tion. In our opinion a great mistake is made in having these frames too elaborately ornamented. It is not the frame we want to exhibit but the picture, therefore anything tending to lead the eye from that is an error. The frame surrounding an oil painting should be broad and comparatively plain, as we thus separate

secured to the wall just underneath the cornice or frieze, upon which hooks are made to slide along, not only affords a firm support, but is an addition to the decoration of a room. This moulding may be made and fixed by any ordinary joiner, or may be bought at most of the paper-hanging establishments, in gilt, black, or in various woods in combination with gilt beads. The hooks also may be procured from the same source. Brass rods have been much used for hanging pictures from, but they are not so serviceable or neat-looking as a picture moulding, they are also soon spoiled by the action of the gas and moisture in the room, which eats into and destroys the lacquer. They are now but little used.

Strong wire, cord or line, both "gold" and "silver," is now made, of different thicknesses, for hanging pictures, and is admirably adapted for the purpose, being very thin but capable of bearing great weights. All picture-cords of whatever kind should be as near the color of the wall upon which they are put as possible, in order to cause them to be but little seen. Too many cords are always objectionable. It is better to hang the picture with straight cords, that is to loop the cord on to two hooks so that it shall be perpendicular at each side of the picture, and not looped on to a single hook or nail. When one picture is hung beneath another the bottom one should be hung from the one above and not from the top; we thus avoid multiplying the cords, which is always objectionable. Pictures may also be hung without any cords showing by crossing the cord through the rings at the back of the picture, and looping this into a nail or hook; neither cord or hook will then be seen. When picture mouldings are not fixed, strong nails may be used having earthenware, china, or brass heads to them. These screw on to the head of the nail, so that the nail may be knocked into its place and the head screwed on afterward. These are very neat and have a good appearance, and always clean up well.

Pictures of all kinds should be kept free from dust at the back, for where this accumulates injury is sure to result. To effect this two pieces of cork at the bottom edge of the frame, will keep the frame from the wall, relieve the pressure, and allow the dust to a great degree to fall down and be cleared away. Gold frames should never be dusted with anything but a feather brush, and when they become dirty, servants or inexperienced persons should not be allowed to attempt to clean them, as they will be sure to spoil them. In cleaning the glass of water-color paintings, and engravings, the greatest care should be used to avoid rubbing the frames. They never should be wetted with the sponge or leather, or they will soon be spoiled.

We are indebted to our English contemporary, *The Journal of Decorative Art*, for these excellent practical suggestions.



COFFER OF CARVED WOOD.

and confine the picture so that the eye takes in the whole of it, without being confused or interfered with by any external object.

In the hanging of pictures there are several points necessary to be attended to in order that they may be safe and easily adjusted. A picture moulding firmly

inspired by the more ancient works. They incline somewhat to the tendency of the age, which is to execute quickly in order to make money. The avalanche of fans which has fallen on Paris within a few years, the profusion of subjects, in more or less bad taste, has made the fan greatly decline in the point of view of art.

MADAME LA BARONNE DE-LAMARDELLE thus states the condition of fan-painting in France at the present day: Although the style is quite different, the fans of the present day have also their place. Several fan mounts have been signed by more than one of our great painters, who have not thought it derogatory to do so. Diaz, Gavarni, Hamon, Lami, Schilt and Marius, have given us some lovely compositions. Their colors are rich in tone, and their pencil full of expression. Perchance they are not sufficiently